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THE ETHICS OF COLLEGE STUDENTS¹

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[This is the second of a series of articles on the ethical standards prevalent in different occupations. The first, by Mr. John F. Moors, on "Ethics in Modern Business," appeared in the January number of the REVIEW.—ED.]

The American college is a picturesque, a unique, a very vital community. Students are not out of the world—a college is not a monastery; yet it is a world of its own, with peculiar objects and traditions, with a distinct atmosphere. The catalogue shows a curriculum, a faculty, a few hundred names, and the college would seem to be lectures, study, recitations. But around all that and including it, the college is a great fraternity, a mystic circle, a cult. It is Alma Mater, a glorified personality.

Have college students a code of ethics in any way peculiar? It is thought that their notions of right and wrong are twisted, differing in some respects from the commonly accepted code; that some commandments are subtracted from, some added to the code; that the individual is subordinated to the community and does not assert himself against college sentiment, which is often wrong; that, in general, freedom from restraint and sense of irresponsibility mark the college student. I think that, so far as there is any ground for these suspicions, it is in the carelessness and thoughtlessness of youth rather than in any conscious immorality, or that it is found in

¹ The professional schools of a university are not included in this inquiry. College boys have there become men, and, while there is some acquaintance with students of the college, their main interests are different from the interests of undergraduates. My own experience has been gained in Amherst College, of which I was President from 1899 to 1912. It has no professional or graduate schools, is not a university, but simply a college.

love of fun. I think also that the great majority of students act under a very high ethical standard.

An enumeration of the distinctive virtues of students is one way of recognizing the code of ethics which, consciously or unconsciously, they adopt. This enumeration will lead up to their religion. Ethics and religion can be considered separately, though in fact they are inseparable.

This very subject, under the title of the "morals and manners of college students," was discussed before the National Education Association a few years ago, three college Presidents participating. There was a marked unanimity respecting the virtues of students. I was one of the three, and, with several years' experience since that time, I have no reason to change my opinion. The prime virtue of students is truthfulness. The pursuit of knowledge promotes truthfulness. Knowledge is truth. The supreme virtue of the scholar is veracity. Love of truth for truth's sake is intellectual virtue. It is the very basis of morality. This is the temper of students in all colleges. Some are lazy, taking the line of least intellectual resistance; some regard study as a hardship and go about it doggedly; but our students are truth-seekers, indignant towards falsehood and deceit. An ignorant or superficial teacher is not respected. It is a fatal verdict: "He does not know his subject." A teacher who evades facts, who is not downright honest in his opinions, is despised. I said that intellectual conscientiousness promotes morality. It certainly promotes truthfulness. College men, whatever their faults and wrongdoings, will not tell lies. A man's word is sacred. This virtue, which is associated with the English gentleman, has become as distinctively the virtue of the American gentleman and scholar.

And so, again, students regard themselves as gentlemen. They have the virtues of a gentleman. The ideal

is the ideal of a gentleman, of an honorable, generous, courteous man. There is no place where meanness has so little toleration as in college. You will search long to discover a student who intentionally hurts the feelings of a fellow-student or does not applaud the success of a comrade. A student must be a gentleman in all relations. Sports must be gentlemanly. There are queer notions, to be sure, of the manners, the speech, and dress of a gentleman. In some colleges rough and negligent dress is assumed, but only on college premises. Abroad or in society, none more punctilious than they. The code of manners in their mutual relations is somewhat peculiar. Nicknames are applied freely, but are expressions of regard and even affection, never of derogation. The give and take of conversation is slangy, possibly to the enrichment of the English language, but is recognized as the patois of the tribe and not for foreign use. The student is polite to ladies, and believes he can move with grace in the best society. In all his actions, the ideal of a gentleman in its essential moral quality is before him. "Thou shalt be a gentleman" is the first amendment of the Ten Commandments, and on it hang the academic law and prophets.

This leads to honor. Students are honorable. One illustration of this is the "honor system," which has been adopted in several colleges. As a system it pertains to examinations. Under the old system instructors were present during the examinations to watch the students and detect cribbing. Now the instructor remains a few minutes to answer any questions, and then leaves the room. A committee of students judges alleged instances of cheating (discovered usually by internal evidence, such as the verbal identity of papers, or the same mistakes in two papers). There is a hearing, and if the offence is admitted or proved, the committee recommends to the faculty that the offender be suspended or

expelled. The committee is usually more severe than the faculty would be, but the recommendation is generally adopted. Whereas there had been much cribbing, under the honor system there have been only two or three cases a year, and those were Freshmen. There was, to be sure, a tendency to go by the letter of the rules. If, for example, essays were not mentioned, then copying from a book, it was held, did not come under the rules. But, on the whole, the honor system is lived up to. In one college the students have been considering the extension of the system to all relations, not confining it to examinations. Honor, it may be said, is higher than morality, for it is more than justice. It is generosity and trust.

I should class among the virtues of students the democratic spirit. The rich and the poor from all sections of the country meet together. Each one stands upon his merit, not upon wealth or parentage. A college likes to boast that it is democratic, and regards the reputation of being aristocratic as a slur. The president of his class, the captain of the football team, a member of the oldest fraternity, as likely as not is working his way through college.

Loyalty is a virtue of students, loyalty to the college. One that excels in any capacity must run, play ball, sing, write, debate for the glory of the college. The student that will not come out is disloyal. He must make sacrifices for his college, his class, his fraternity. He will be a good citizen by-and-by, a patriot.

Drinking has diminished in recent years. An intoxicated student is rarely seen. There are few men of dissipated habits. The Dean of Amherst College recently said: "Some years ago drinking in the fraternity houses, which had not been tolerated by a number of our leading fraternities for years, was banished by all, and that by the action of the fraternities themselves." I

think that, in all our colleges, there has been a marked improvement within the last twenty-five years.

Impurity is exceptional. There are, indeed, some licentious students, but college sentiment frowns upon them. "Cut that out," fellows say to the obscene talker.

Self-depreciation may not rank as a virtue, but it is a characteristic of nearly all students. Boasting is excluded. A student who has done well and is praised is apt to say, "I ought to have done better than that," or "It was rotten."

Certain customs, peculiar to colleges, have lapsed. Hazing is no longer practised in respectable colleges. Physical violence and personal indignities are brutalizing to those that inflict them. To be sure, even when inflicted, it was understood by both parties that insults and injuries are impersonal, that the student suffers and is made to appear ridiculous, not because he is Thomas Smith, but because he is a Freshman, or because the violence and indignity are initiational mysteries. Happily these impositions diminished till they were little more than amusement for all concerned, and in most colleges have disappeared. All that remains is the class contest for possession of a cane, a cannon, a flag, or for breaking up a class supper. Tricks on the faculty are of the past. Students no longer regard the faculty as natural enemies, but as friends. Government is not paternal. Graduates used to tell of pranks, thefts, escapades, ludicrous objects placed in class-rooms. There is nothing of that sort now. Those frolics and fooleries are not to be regarded as immoralities, but only as silly customs, betraying a perverted sense of humor. On the whole, students of today are clean-minded, honorable, truthful, and generous. The morale of our colleges is healthy.

Religion is a vital interest of college students. Emphasis is on the essentials, on reality, on the life;

not on rites, ceremonies, antiquities, doctrines. Young men think more about religion than is commonly supposed. It is believed that their interest does not run in that direction; that they are all life, vivacity, gayety, on pleasure bent; that they are light-minded, unrestrained; that they regard the religious life as sombre and restricted. That is true of some that are shallow, of some that are conceited and selfish, of some that are immoral. But youth is idealistic. It is the young men that see visions. Students talk with most earnestness, not of sports, though they are earnest enough about sports, but of social problems, of politics, of philosophy, of religion. Students who have seemed to be external, so to speak, are awakened by studies in philosophy, literature, science, by great world-movements. Religion used to be shunned. Students would not talk about it. They thought of it simply as a personal appeal that makes one uncomfortable. There is no shyness now in approach to religion, but it is talked of freely.

The present generation in its attitude towards religion has a decided advantage over preceding generations of the past century. A century ago there was much scepticism, which invaded the colleges. Miracles were denied; the supernatural was flouted; errors of the Bible were pointed out. The scoffer was abroad. Students boasted that they were infidels, atheists, sceptics. A religious student was despised—a goody-goody, flabby, narrow, ignorant person. But now a student boasting of his unbelief, challenging Christianity, would be considered a callow, silly fellow. The very words, “infidel,” “sceptic,” “atheist,” have passed out of use. Half a century ago there was much doubt concerning religion. That time has been called the age of doubt. Evolution was making its way, and it seemed to shake the very foundations of faith. It did shake and overthrow certain

notions that were no part of religion, such as the recent and instantaneous creation of the world, the origin of man and his fall. Spiritual realities were not undermined. The Bible had been regarded as inspired and authoritative, every statement the word of God. More than once, when I was a pastor, young men said to me, "I should like to join the church, but I have doubts; I cannot believe the story of Jonah and the whale, nor about Adam." Ingersoll's stock in trade at that time was the mistakes of the Bible, the cruelties of the Israelitish wars, the imprecatory psalms. It was the age of doubt. But Biblical criticism treated the Bible as any ancient literature is treated. The traditional view of authorship, of the history of the Jews, of the earlier books, of the historical value of some portions, was modified, and there was a sense of uneasiness. Since many believed that the Bible is without errors or mistakes in any particular, it was a shock to be told that there are errors. That is all past. Young people of today do not even know that there was a reaction. They do not say, "I cannot believe this, I cannot believe that." Religion has come to terms with science without loss to religion. Science is founded on mystery; it can only see the "how" but cannot account for the potencies. The spiritual and moral values stand out clear and unencumbered. The Bible is recovered as religious literature: poetry, prophecy, gospel, faith, the Christ. The fact is that the younger generation was not brought up on the old theology. They would hardly know what one is talking about who should use the doctrinal phraseology current in former times.

The note of religion to which students respond is manliness; positive, healthy, generous, courageous manhood. A Christian is one who takes account of whatsoever things are true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, of

good report. The pallid type is not their conception of the Christian. Cant, pretence, they will not tolerate. Virile character, unsullied honor, magnanimity, courage, fill out the ideal of the Christian. Christianity is, to students, the religion of service. This is a striking sign of the times. To the call to service there is quick response. Students are ready to help. This is in accordance with the precept that thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. I have before me the annual report of the Christian Association of Amherst College, from which I quote the account of Community Service:

“Certainly the final test of Christianity lies in action, in the measure of helpfulness and service to those with whom we live. The very evident spirit of democracy and co-operation in the college is one of the best applications of Christian principles to which we can point. But our college world is necessarily somewhat restrictive and academic. So the Association is providing students with occasional opportunities for broadening service and practical usefulness in larger communities. Some one hundred boys in Amherst and Holyoke are being directed in clean sportsmanship and straight living by seventeen members of our boys’ work committee. Thirty men are spending an evening a week at the People’s Institute in Northampton, teaching immigrants the essentials of citizenship. For eight years the Association has helped support and direct the summer vacation school in Holyoke. Finally, we sent thirty-five deputations last year to preparatory schools, speaking before all sorts of boys on such subjects as ‘The Real Values of College,’ and ‘The Manliness of Christianity,’ and through personal conferences interesting them in college.”

In every college and university are bands of students engaged in similar service. A clergyman who was graduated from Williams College about thirty years ago, having preached there recently, said that in his day there were college prayer-meetings and class prayer-meetings every week and that he was rather sorry none are held now. However, he added, the Christian Association is very active and does a fine work.

Jesus Christ is revered. Students see in him the ideal. They do not try to define his person in exact terms. He is apprehended, as the world apprehends him, as the great friend of all the sons of men, the severe denouncer of social wrong, the self-sacrificing, loving, sympathetic helper, who brings them to God, his Father and our Father. He inspires courage, honor, faith. He is Master.

The college pulpit is a throne of power. The great preachers of the country come gladly to colleges with the message of truth and righteousness. The student responds with all his heart; for the intellectual man is the spiritual man. Students listen eagerly to preaching on the real, human Christ and on the service of man to man. Sermons are ethical and spiritual rather than theological. On Sunday evenings services are frequently held, at which attendance is not required, yet many students are present to hear a favorite preacher. After the service, the speaker visits students in the fraternity houses and in the dormitories. Groups sit around him, and ask questions that evince a deep interest in religion and in its application to life. One preacher returning to my house at midnight exclaimed, "Tired, but happy."

There are Bible Study classes, enrolling, in some colleges, as many as three-fourths of the student body. It is said that the young people of today are ignorant of the Bible, that they have read very little of it, that they do not recognize scriptural allusions. It is true that they have not been required to read the Bible through and become familiar with it, and that is a great lack in the education of the young. But of late years in the colleges there has been a revival of interest in the Bible, considered as literature and religion.

We do not hear now of revivals of religion in college. Formerly, when those who are now middle-aged men and old men were students, revivals were frequent. It was

said that at one New England college there had been a revival sometime during the residence of every class. The day of prayer for colleges was a day set apart when the churches prayed that there might be a revival. At the college it was a day of solemnity and prayer. The unconverted were marked men to be labored with and brought to the point of decision. It is not in that way that the college or the church now fosters the religious life, but rather by instruction, by appeal to manhood, to faith, and to service.

The Christian ministry is favorably regarded in the colleges. Not as many in proportion to the whole number of students become preachers as in former times. That is in part because there are so many professions, so many kinds of business, and because sons of business men in large numbers go to college. Formerly nearly all students were destined for the learned professions or for teaching. But some of the very best men choose the ministry. No surprise is expressed when it is said that So-and-so, a leading man in college, has entered a theological seminary. The only comment is, "He will succeed," or, "He will make a mighty fine preacher."

This representation of the morality and religion of college students is not an over-statement, but is, in the main, in accordance with the facts. I have looked upon the college community as a whole, in order to recognize the common standard of ethics. But a community that includes boys of seventeen and men of twenty-two years is not at one level of maturity. A Senior is not exactly the same as a Freshman. There is progress from year to year. One observes the development of students, which in some instances is very rapid. You can almost see them grow in knowledge, in sound judgment, in character. You can hardly believe, some one says, that such a one is the same man who entered three years ago; a boy then, he is a man now. Some indeed

seem to stand still, as immature as they were at first. Of a Senior I have heard it remarked, he is a Freshman still. A few deteriorate, and they are apt to disappear. But nine-tenths go from strength to strength, and, intimately associated, they build one another up. A college that counts students by hundreds secures more acquaintance of men with each other than a college that counts students by thousands, yet the American student of the large and of the small college has a high standard of intellectual conscientiousness, of right conduct, of character, and of a reasonable faith and service.